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CAPRICIOUS WINDS

HELEN BIRCH BARTLETT

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CAPRICIOUS WINDS

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BY

HELEN BIRCH BARTLETT

WITH A
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE BY
JANET A. FAIRBANK

AND
AN APPRECIATION BY
HARRIET MONROE

Boston and New York
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INTRODUCTION

HELEN BIRCH BARTLETT was born in Chicago in February, 1884. Her parents were members of an intimate group of cultured people who valiantly insisted on the development of art in the crude new city they were helping to build. In her childhood she heard great talk of creating a symphony orchestra and an art museum. She was taken assiduously to operas. In her mother's house she met the artists of the world, the singers and the painters and the writers. She was married in February, 1919. She died in October, 1925.

Her education was a singularly enlightened one for her period. She was taught mainly by governesses, and traveled much: it was a cultural experience which developed individual taste. Even as a child she must have had few of those mob judgments which impeded the intellectual growth of so many little girls of the early nineties.

Perhaps it was as a result of this upbringing, or possibly it was because of an innate nobility of soul, that Helen Birch developed into the sort of

woman she did. She had the most unprejudiced mind I ever knew. She was never ruthless, and agreement was not necessary to her, yet she had a highly sensitive taste. She selected rather than condemned, and her conviction that everyone has a right to an individual point of view made her tolerant of doctrines antagonistic to her. Her desire was to live rather than to criticize. She was no Puritan; life in its rich current fascinated her; she wanted above all to understand, and yet, with all her freedom from conventionality, Helen Birch Bartlett was devoted to form. Her life had a pattern both dignified and beautiful. The grace of the Victorian Age she emerged from always appealed to her, and although she cast off its affectations, she retained much of its innate dignity. Her feeling for form was only as a means to social charm and the grace of living, however: she never allowed it to trap her spirit.

She had, in addition to these qualities, deeply rooted affections and an enchanting humor which made radiant companionship with her. She had a great gift for friendship, and the people who loved her and whom she loved came from every walk of life. Her active interest in any creative work was an important part of her character, and her sym-

pathetic comprehension of the struggles of other artists was extraordinarily stimulating. Her delight was to help young musicians and painters through their difficult early moments, both with kindly understanding and with material aid, and to enable them to win their careers.

Her environment meant much to her, and had always the charm of her individuality. She was romantic about places she loved, and especially was this true of Florida, where, long before it became a fashionable resort, she spent the winters of her childhood exploring leaf-dark lagoons in a canoe, and swimming in a tropical ocean. Life there always had glamour for her, and she harmonized her own personality to the flamboyant and decorative quality of the place. Her very clothes were gayer there, her humor more extravagant, and she was never more essentially herself than when she yielded to the enchantment of the life she most enjoyed.

It was to be expected that so rich a nature should demand individual expression, and before she was twenty Helen Birch was writing songs. She published several of them, and achieved a real success. After a number of years' work in harmony and composition with her distinguished

friend Bernard Ziehm, she understood the technical side of music, and she was especially interested in orchestral arrangements. It seemed certain that her talent would continue to flow along the line of musical composition.

And then, life flowered for her. Not until maturity did she experience love, and her development through emotion was an exquisite thing to witness. One learned the beauty of life through knowing her then.

This disclosure to her of resplendent happiness created in her a necessity for new expression, and she turned for the first time to poetry. In her music she had shown a feeling for form, and her poems, although essentially modern, have an ordered grace which is rooted in the same sense. It was not, however, for the perfection of the medium that she found joy in writing them. She had made a great discovery of new beauty in life, and in her poetry she expressed it — not only in the poignant emotion of her love poems, but in her susceptibility to all sensuous approach. Color, scenery, human affections, all took on a new significance for her, and her nature overflowed into poetry in her desire to testify to the delight of life.

The delight of life! That was Helen Birch Bartlett's precious gift, both to give and to receive. In the few years of her marriage her quickened interest in existence led her into new fields. Living intensely as she did, contemporary experience and expression enthralled her. Modern art made an irresistible appeal to her. She had always wanted people to express life as they really saw it, unsentimentalized and unshadowed by tradition, and this at once made rational to her the new forms in music, letters and painting. She found in the art of to-day an answer to something creative in her own spirit, which always marched with that of adventurous youth.

There is always something triumphant in the tragedy of untimely death. Helen Bartlett died too young, but nevertheless she lived her life to its peak. For her there were no desolate discoveries of downward slopes — no adjustments — no capitulations. She died at her life's blazing noon, and she had never seen a sunset which did not seem to her fairer than the dawn.

JANET A. FAIRBANK

January, 1927

THE POETRY OF HELEN BIRCH BARTLETT

It was early in 1917 that Helen Birch first sent some poems to the editor of *POETRY*, concealing their authorship under another name lest a friendly prejudice should overvalue them. I had known her as a musician, a composer of songs of exquisite texture, and was hardly prepared for this invasion of another field. But the poems asserted their authorship not only by their musician-like handling of tune, phrasing, rhythm, not only by their personal and temperamental study of the technique of free verse as a method capable of shadings and variations suited to modern uses and her own needs, but chiefly by their emotional sincerity and depth, by the vital thrill in them which corresponded with her own intense vitality and profound love of life.

I felt in her work this enrichment of undercurrents and overtones due to the beautiful sincerity and vigor of her character. Even the briefest poems in that first group — 'Can This Be All?' 'Prophets,' 'Forewarned' — were resonant

with emotional power, saying more than the mere words, just as an old violin, played by a magic fiddler, may enrich and enlarge whatever piece it plays. These brief poems were queries, unanswerable questions uttered level-eyed in the face of Fate; uttered never impatiently, never defiantly, but bravely, searchingly, as from a proud soul fit for the quest.

The longer poems in this first group present more personal facts of her experience: 'Music,' with its recognition of the personality of a house and of its utter silence and vacancy after her mother's death; 'Up in the Hills,' with its ancient racial earth-love, its joyous oneness 'with the fragrant, laughing, sun-baked earth'; and 'Mid-October,' with its challenge to decay, its acceptance of a high and leaping death — the kind of death that came to her a few years later, as to a swift deer falling from a cliff:

Autumn, autumn!
I will not live!
I'll go now, now, with all my memories and my joys.

I will not live
To have them blown
Like ashes from an altar by capricious winds.

Later poems showed similar energies of character and talent, in directions somewhat more specialized and varied. The poet's sense of humor was profound, fundamental; in certain poems, notably 'Laughing in the Moonlight,' we get a hint of the grotesqueness, the strange absurdity of life, an echo of humanity's involuntary response to the 'sly delightful wicked old laughter' of the earth. In others, for example the Tallahassee sequence, the humor is more incidental; odd incongruities, queer aspirations and certitudes — whether of nature, human beings, or beasts — attract her keen eye and eager sympathy. We feel here her love of animals. Life to her was incomplete without dogs especially, and she respected the individuality of each dog she knew.

In certain other poems — 'Lola in Silver-Point,' 'A Line-a-Day for Certain Lovers' — we have studies of human character under the stress of tragic circumstance; people ultra-sensitive, super-civilized, in Lola's case delicately fragile. We feel the beauty of fragility, as of soft lights playing on iridescent Venetian glass. In 'The Tallahassee Limited' we observe some of the more bedraggled aspects of modern life, ex-

pressed in a mood of half-humorous realism, while 'Lola' gives us a glimpse into life's too-civilized destructive refinements, a frail fading-away of its essence under the slanting moon.

Undoubtedly life meant more than art to Helen Birch Bartlett. Her last seven years especially were too rich in happiness to permit the full indulgence of her creative impulse toward either music or poetry. And those of us who experienced, even to a slight degree, her genius for friendship, and who realized her joyous acceptance of high emotion in all delicate intimacies, can scarcely regret that she gave only a fraction of her superb vitality to art, and therefore left in this volume a fragmentary record. The time granted her was short; in her few years she lived with a fullness of delight and power beyond the reach of most of us. If these poems tell but a little of her joyous story, they will fulfill their function.

HARRIET MONROE

MY MESSAGE

When I go,
Carry me this message
To a few of my friends:
Tell them to forget me
Most of the time,
That I'll be far away
On some business of my own.
But on all clear windy mornings
Tell them I'll be there
In the sunlight,
Flickering around;
And sometimes,
When the water ripples soft
Against the land,
And the afternoon
Is one of those quiet hazy ones,
I'll be near by,
Making them think about me
Then.

I

CAPRICIOUS WINDS

⁂

CAN THIS BE ALL?

Can this be all?
Can this unfinished thing be called complete,
And I be left to face it thus forever,
Forever to twist and turn, remould and tint
anew?

LIFE

Gathering by the way strange sustenance from
all strange bitter fruits —
And in the sunlight and the rough breath of the
wind
Feeling the great persuasion of the soul.

FOREWARNED

WHAT have I to do with the world?
What has the world to do with me,
Who know now that in the end I must have traffic
Only with the things of my own spirit?

OPIATE

I WOULD bathe in the sky's blue!
I would overflow the world with my laughter and
my love!
I would vanish like a circle upon the water!

But I would not move
To accomplish these —
Or any other —
Things.

SANCTUARY

WHITE water rippling.

There is a veil between us
Hangs like centuries of time,
And all that has been
Dissolves into the motes of gold
That move in the pathway of the sun.

The gates swing slowly open.

LITTLE JOYS

How sweet a thing it is,
The way hundreds of little joys
Will gather and chatter and huddle themselves,
Lovingly,
About a great sorrow!

UNLOVE

Love is the only thing in all the world
That I have so fully understood
That when I think of you
I think that there is no thing
You might say, or do,
But that I,
Knowing that you know nothing of love,
Would understand.

ARTIST

Bird, whose eyes I cannot see,
Whose flight is beautiful,
From your wings in passing
Bright plumage is drifting down to us.

VERTIGO

What did you play?
Or have such melodies no names?
And were they played on ivory keys,
Or did your fingers find a way,
So, touch by touch,
To where the nerves of all my being
Stretched their uneasy length?

Did I look deep into your eyes,
Or were mine closed,
When sudden vision of some new world
Caught me in floods of light?

I laid my hand upon your arm
And felt the cool black curtain of your sleeve.

Why, when you left me,
Was I plunged in sorrow —
Weary of all known things,
Grey, languid, and too dull for thought?

Slowly the moments passed,
While still I leaned
Against the door which closed you out,
And felt no pain.

MUSIC

THE house is still.
The very pictures on the walls have lost their painted meaning.
The place seems new and strangely vacant.
I see the old brown Chinese figure in the panel facing me; he has a look of stupid blankness that is utterly new.
The three big dogs asleep here at my feet —
What cabalistic word will be required to rouse them from their almost deathlike slumbers?
So still — so still the house —
My heart so still.

And I might lift my head and speak and move about and change all this,
But that I know what thing has made it so,
Whose absence the place can feel,
Whose voice is heard no more.
And I think of the great free-sounding melodies that filled the room —

Great silhouettes that passed —
And clear full living tones that live no longer.

This is the lifeless vacuum left by the passage of
the storm.

A VOICE BREAKS IN UPON THE SILENCE

Swiftly,
Secretly,
Silently,
Winding through some unsensed aerial channel,
With subtle solace and challenging, it comes —
Suddenly I know that it is there:
'Alert — Alert — Arise!'

. . . . . .

Whatever the day bring forth, that will I greet —
Having drunk divinely, divinely, of the dawn!

THE OLD ORDERS CHANGE

The east wind blows into the room,
The curtains twist and flap;
I hear the thin brass rings slip back and forth
Along the rod.

I like to be alone to-night —
I like the wind;
It's cold and strong,
And in my heart
There is a new metallic quietness.

The world of yesterday
Is dead —
It died an hour or two ago.

THE LETTER

I HOLD your letter against my eyes,
And a terrible happiness
Curls and folds itself about me
Like a cloud.

Like smoke it rises and falls,
And wreathes itself.

SUNSET

Top of a little hill
You brought the car to a slow stop.
The road ran on into a blinding curtain of gold.
Tall jet-black trees standing sentinel
On either side
Guarded the glowing hoard between.
No wind blew —
Not a leaf stirred
In the glittering stillness.

Taut, nerve-wrung silence had grown up
Between us.
We knew
That we were afraid of each other.

You spoke —
I looked at you . . .
The glow of heaven was black
To the glow of your eyes!
Your arms crushed me into flaming unconsciousness,
And we lost ourselves utterly
In the beauty of kisses.

NOCTURNE

Day long
Our souls have intertwined themselves,
And now that night has come
Our bodies know
That some red dawn of love
Is sweeping up these great star-dappled slopes
To flood our hearts with passion.
The boat slips through the upturned phosphorescent waters,
The silver-black horizon draws in close,
The stars hang low.
Oh, my lover,
There is a world
Unknown to ships or stars!

THE HOURS

The hours between us
Lie deep and deep and deep . . .
They have drifted like fallen leaves
Against my thoughts.
Life is too close to me . . .

THE PERFUME OF DEATH

The perfume of Death is everywhere!
Dead leaves —
Dead souls —
And hearts!
Dead winds circle me in a sighing scent of burning brush,
Of dying leaf and blossom and branch,
And all that lived and rioted
When I too . . .

Ah, do not twist your scented garlands
So tight about my throat!
Nor touch my lips and breathe upon me
The perfume of your breath,
O, Death!

Death!
Though I called you,
I never really wanted you.

PROPHETS

Prophet of joy!
Before ever the deed lived, you came.

Be the fulfillment what it was,
I do prostrate myself for love and lay here at
your feet my heart of thanks.

Prophet of evil!
It is now your hour!

II

UP IN THE HILLS

THE earth smells old and warm and mellow, and
all things lie at peace.
I too serenely lie here under the white-oak tree,
and know the splendid flight of hours all
blue and gay, sun-drenched and still.
The dogs chase rabbits through the hazel-brush;
I hear now close at hand their eager cries, now
swift receding into the distance, leaving
a-trail behind them in the clear sweet air
shrill bursts of joy.
There's something almost drowsy in that waning
clamor;
It brings the stillness nearer, and a sense of being
bodily at one with the old warm earth,
Blessedly at one with the fragrant laughing sun-
baked earth,
At one with its sly delightful wicked old laughter.

OCTOBER IN ILLINOIS

October —
A blood-red line,
Low in the western sky —

Gray everywhere —

Cold and clear
The frozen yellow fields — .

Nearness and distance interchangeable —

A single rabbit-hawk
Rapidly and sharply
Winging its way
Into the twilight.

AUTUMN

Leaves whirl about my feet;
Leaves, leaves dance over my head —
Brown leaves.
And their madness and love of death blow
through my heart.
(Oh, the perfume of these drifting golden leaves!)

What wine can stain the soul with redder glory
Than this wild, sudden thirst for sudden death?

They rise like clouds of incense
From swift-swinging golden censers —
Clouds and clouds!
And the western sky is a glow of light
As yellow and white as the face of a Christian
saint.

Autumn, autumn!
I will not live!
I'll go now, now, with all my memories and my
joys.

I will not live
To have them blown
Like ashes from an altar by capricious winds.

AND SO THE DAYS GO BY

And so the days go by,
All filled with majesty and stateliness.
The eastways slant of the morning beams,
So fresh,
Turns subtly into noon,
And with a secrecy beyond belief
The hours pass
And the long rays slant into the west.
They tint the heavy phlox-heads red like fire,
And make black shadow of the pale wild currant.
The hills beyond the lake drift far away,
Unreal and blue.

Unreal and pure and fey —
(Oh, the long hour and the rising mist!) —
Is the frail beauty of the twilight gray!

LAUGHING IN THE MOONLIGHT

Three women laughing
In the moonlight,
In the night —
Eerie,
Strange,
With sound of water
Thundering up the cliff;
With sound that comes from swaying boughs
Of pine trees,
Giant pines of a virgin forest —
Fringe of wilderness,
The border
Of a narrow strip of clearing
On the bluffs.

Laughing! How their voices carry!
Fearlessly!
Such merriment
As must awake the sleepy soul of the forest.
Merriment so mad —
How it carries!
Elfish laughter —
Far out over the wicked waters,
Peals and peals!

And the moonlight wavers, glitters,
Strokes their white throats with its poison;
Makes its streaks and streams of silver
Cold and colder in its joy;
Sinks its sharp, silver-dappled, shining moon-fangs
In their eyes.

Laughing women,
Mad and merry,
Send their voices on the winds;
Calling destiny about them,
Calling to titanic powers:
Till they play,
And their lightness,
And their madness,
And their harsh and eerie laughter
Rouses forces that through æons
Long have slept —
Slept and waited for a summons
Deep enough,
Wild enough,
Light enough,
And evil enough,
To call them forth.
Slow they stretch their unused muscles —
Answer in a dawning smile.

Three women are laughing in the moonlight,
In the night;
And earth is reeling
In light and shadow.
Air and water,
In some fearful manner,
Mingle
With their voices.
All of nature throngs and rushes
Into the vast,
Chaotic
Drift of sound —
A world of maddened, unchained souls,
Of wicked, savage glee!

Naked Earth
Swings into consciousness,
Uncovered,
Sudden,
Reeling in light and shadow,
Through this hellish, hellish laughter!
Through this wild,
Malicious,
Evil,
Evil
Laughter!

ENVY

Brown dog, I envy you!
Your paw is hurt and you are unhappy and bewildered,
But you have crawled away into the dark cool place under the stone porch, where no one can reach you or even look at you.
How it must ease the pain to be there in the dark, alone, licking your paw!
Slowly, softly licking!
You can curl up and sleep as long as you like, and later wake, and nose it and lick it again:
All in the cool darkness with no one looking at you,
And no one speaking to you.
Dear, big, kind brown dog!

CAT

The old and wrinkled hand of death has been
here,
Laid upon this head, these eyes,
And this poor little cat (a black and white)
As like as not knew nothing of life
But hunger that was appeased by rats.

Unless — finding her here among these woody
hills — one might believe
That some long splendid deadly hunt for prey
that never could be hers
At last made life a royal thing too sweet to hold,
And the sudden ruddy hand of Death
Covered and closed her blazing eyes.

PHANTOM

There is a kind of woman
With eyes of malachite,
And thin gold twisted hair, like Julia Farnese's.

I know her to be my enemy . . .
And all about her . . .
Even to the flower she holds in her hand.

I pray!
That if ever she comes
To darken the unfolding of my days,
I may not stoop below the chosen level
To offer her some outrageous courtesy.

THE EARTH CRY

I HAVE drunk blood,
And blood,
And blood,
Till I am sick;
Like some old satiated vampire
That hangs,
All heavy-eyed,
About a scarce dead corpse.
I have become obscene with horror,
Sentient of one thing only:
My bursting lips
That do but suck and suck.

I have had my piled-up æons of glory,
Swung star-wise out among the stars
All in my burning grandeur,
Lonely and immense!
What ancient horror
Laid itself
Upon my virgin freshness,
That I should breed this devil's tribe called
Man?

How dare they come in screaming filthy masses
To die upon my breast!

Higher rises and deeper sinks the crimson gulf,
Blood, blood and blood,
And blood . . . and blood!
Better the burned-out ashes of quiet sterile
purity
Than the cloak I wear,
Than the cloak of blood —
The living men and the dead —
That cover my fields and me.

This is my body . . .
You have broken . . .
Among you!

III

A LINE-A-DAY FOR CERTAIN LOVERS
LOLA IN SILVERPOINT

A LINE-A-DAY FOR CERTAIN LOVERS

REMEMBRANCE

I NEVER forgot you,
And I loved your silences.
I believed in you, and yet I could not believe.

I was both constant and inconstant.
You were faithless — yet immeasurably true.

A time came
When your memory swung like a bright pendulum.
Backwards and forwards in my brain,
Channeling a groove.

Even had I loved you,
I would have chosen the same way.

RE-ENCOUNTER

WITH your first word
You royally out-starred my sudden blazing faith.
What you appeared to me in that instant
Will never be told.

UNDERCURRENTS

THERE were warnings and devious oppositions:
Frankness, simplicity,
And many, many undercurrents.
And all the while I knew that what they feared
of me
I had no desire to accomplish.
. . . . . .
I took as much — as little — all that I wanted,
all.

I alone guessed how much it was;
But they blessed me, sighing in their relief,
For how little.

PREMONITIONS

CLOUD upon cloud of mist,
Fog clouds,
And curtains of rain.

Oh, the glistening world that lay last night
Beyond the narrow and indrawing circle
Of this gray morning's vision!

I fear some secret chemistry at work
Among these shifting shrouds,

That stir and move repulsively,
Like dank old water-weeds
In an old and stagnant pond.
These dim cloud-walls may well conceal
Some darker crown
Than the pool's white crown of fire-flies.

Have you no delicately colored words,
Does your hand possess no new grace,
Your eyes no cunning,
To lure away this fantasy?
Your eyes . . .

Your eyes!

THE BRINGERS OF GIFTS

High above the city
We stood, and watched the boats upon the river.
You had your dreams . . .
But the deeper peace that I knew at last
Was not in your eye's gray depths.

From the cup of my hands
You drank but the remembrance of sorrow;
I knew but the fragrance of your spirit
When the censer
Lay broken at my feet.

Above the city
We watched the life of the river.
We saw the lights appear . . .

BELSHAZZAR

We were walled about with sinister intentions,
And the hot sweet summer day was suddenly alive
With quickening fears.
We knew . . . but we shut them out,
As one shuts out the unbearable sunlight of the dawn.

DRIFT

Two hours. . . .
And the somber long kiss of leave-taking.

Your eyes had accepted everything.

And you sank into the long useless future,
While the present slowly disintegrated about us.

EPILOGUE

Blue-purple,
The shadow of the earth
Circles the long horizon.

My life is circled
By the shadow of your love.

Blue-purple out there,
And over the blue
A rose-pink mist that rises —
That rising, fades.

No frail flushed aureole
Crowns the shadow in my heart . . .
Unless this:
That you suffer a little and are often alone
Because of your love
That breathed upon such a pale flame.

LOLA IN SILVERPOINT

LOLA WEARS LACE

WHAT rare dark woman of my world
Can wear white lace
As Lola does?
Something I think it is
About the smooth cold look of her —
Her little jeweled head,
And her skin's mat-ivory gleam,
And a way she has
Of being still.

The flower-shadows in the lace
Droop like soft fingers
Down her limbs' long glacial
Purity of line.

And who but a cold high woman
Could twine lace about her throat —
Could hold her charm
Through all the intricate pale harmo-
nies,
The dim strange other-world

Of silky shadow and sharp light?
I would not touch Lola
Wearing lace,
Knowing how shine her eyes' dark diamonds
Like flames
Reflected in the cloudy surfaces
Of mirrors;
But I would be near her,
Deep compounded as she seems
Of smoky essences
Drawn from slow-dying vapors
That glow by night —
Cold zenith streamer,
Dreaming the aurora of some
Scornful day!

LOLA COQUETTE

Outside the storm raging and howling,
But in the long dining-room
Venetian lace and Spanish point
And eighteenth-century silver
Gleaming like moonlight,
Crystal goblets engraved with figures
Of some long-forgotten hunt,
And Lola in satin
Shimmering and glistening

And saying abominable things
In the manner of two hundred years ago.

Lola Velasquez! Lola Manet!
I shall never understand
A woman whose eyes are black!

Is it because of the storm
That we have candles only?
And how they gutter in the draft!
Blown wrinkled withering yellow,
And the smoke
Mingling with odors of old tapestries
And some woman's scented hair.

Somewhere
A casement is blown in
By the wind,
And all the noise
And terror of the gale
Enter the house.

Lola lowers her head
And looks at me,
While all the others run about
Hindering the servants

With little screams
And frightened vulgar laughing.

Lola looks at me,
And I would give my soul to any devil
For the longing that I feel
To get my fingers around her throat!
The wine-stained linen and the knives'
Long blades of steel,
And the heavy shining satin she wears
Hurt me so,
And the candles' dripping and blowing
Drive me insane!
Only the storm's rage
Holds all level.

THE MOONLIGHT DANCE

Enough of light,
And just enough of dark:
Dancing — a poem
Not to be read aloud.

Lola and I have danced,
Wreathing, winding in the moonlight,
Where the cold white breakers
Dash themselves in spray
Upon the rocks.

Lola in pale gray tulle;
Afloat upon the wind —
A butterfly in a net of black.

Venturers! to have found
The center of the night
In one another's eyes.

Who knows when dancers move,
Or when they stay their steps?

We have withdrawn ourselves
From the dance.
We have become
Part of the great long hungry curve
Of the earth;
Lola leaning against me,
I against the rock.

Is this the thing all dancers
Dance for,
This wave of quietness?
And why they leave off dancing
Suddenly,
To stand motionless,
Eased of the throbbing of limbs and hearts,
Themselves lost, abandoned,
Among mysterious silences?

THE LAKE

Moonlight on the lake,
And Lola,
Pale, in cool silver,
To break the uncertain silence
Off shore.
I watched a long moon-ray
Tongueing
The black smooth thing
Of prismic lac
She tells you
Her hair is.

Lola spoke,
Lightly too,
Of something she knew . . .
Oh, I wish I had not chanced
This night
In Lola's sight!

The moon slants down
Among the blown ripples.
Out there,
Beyond the shore's shelter,
There's such a welter —
Silver and wave and white spray —

That who shall say
Which long bright streak
Is Lola's dress?
Or which one,
Among the dark circles
Untwining still in the silvery water,
Is the brushed-back shining wing
That was her hair?

IV

THE TALLAHASSEE LIMITED

I'VE NOTICED SOME THINGS

I've gone a long way
On a narrow-gauge road
And I've noticed some things:
The ancient serenity of water
Following its own laws,
Moon or no moon.
Sunlight in wet woods,
And the fine rich smell of fresh, upturned earth.
The heavy, beautiful, uncertain arch of the sky,
And the 'feel' of turf,
And the 'feel' of wet sand below tide-line.
It doesn't make much difference
About flowers being beautiful,
It's what they give you to think
That is the wonder.
And it's not what people are,
But the little wavy lines that run
Between them and you
That puts ideas in your head.
I'm glad now
That I haven't much noticed some other things
That make mean passes at you
As you go along.

EVEN IN THE LITTLE CYPRESS SWAMPS

Even in the little cypress swamps
Where the first soft pallid green
Of the spring's breath
Mists up the air,
And the big lady-skirt trunks
Meet their still reflections
In the water —
Even here do they come — slish . . . slash,
With their little tin cups
For rosin and turps,
Where a pine or two
That happened to take root
Ought to be left in peace.

IN THE RAIN

Five antique wormy railroad ties
Set up on end and lolling drunkenly
This way and that,
And stuck on top of each
An ancient rusty letter-box.

Five old railroad ties,
Crowned with tin crowns
And lost in the wet pine woods —
The endless pine woods.

Five old cronies
Leaning this way and that
In the rain.

Not even a path leading to them
Or away from them.

THINKING

A WOMAN sitting in the doorway of her cabin
Watching the red pigs and the brown pigs and
the black pigs
Trample her garden patch,
Must be thinking of other things than cabbages
Or Indian squash.

She may be thinking of her neighbor,
The man with little, hot, round eyes,
Who stands near a window in his cabin,
Wiping his neck with a towel
And watching her.

Anyway, she is thinking
As she sits hunched up
On her doorstep.
And she does not even throw a glance
At the slow-moving train
Which passes
Not a hundred feet away from her.

THE STATION PLATFORM

On the warm, windy station platform
Four men meet.
Two are old acquaintances,
And with a few gestures of the thumb
And a word or two,
All are made known.

Four bodies stiffen.
Four backbones are galvanized into a seeming of
nerve and force.
Four men exchange sturdy firm handshakes.
Four pairs of eyes flash impressively with a momentary steeling of the orbs.

Each man is saying to himself
Down deep where truth is uttered:
'I will buck up and make a showing!
It won't be for long.
We are all nothing but worthless old rags,
But one of these fellows
May be worth impressing.'

On the sunny station platform
Four men part.
The train pulls out slowly.
Four languid arms are vaguely raised to gesture
a faint farewell.
The two who are left behind sink wearily onto a
bench.
There is no talk.
One takes from his pocket an old toothpick and
proceeds to use it as a pastime.

TRAIN STOPS TWENTY MINUTES

'All out for supper!
Eureka Hotel —
Down the board walk —
Straight ahead —
You'll see the place —
You can't miss it.'

The night was warm-cool, soft-gentle.
The trees draped over, interlaced, hung down,
And something was in blossom.
Glory of God! What a night!
What a spring night!

'You won't miss it.'

A large white house set back in a yard,
And the dog-who-owned-the-place
Lying beside the walk,
Noticing and watching and taking stock of every-
body.

Inside the house the night was lost
In a storm of close smells,

And smells of old things
Cooked a long time ago.

You had to go in.
People sat down at your table you didn't like.
The baked hash was loathsome,
And somebody asked for milk.
When the milk came you went out —
But you were held-up in the hall
For the price of the supper.

Outside, the night was there again,
Stroking and soothing you, gentle and velvet,
And all the perfumes of Persia
Winding about your head.

Somewhere the dog had found a big bone treasure
And he gnawed and gnawed regardless of the night,
Regardless of everything but bone.

DOWN THE ROAD

A GALLOPING team,
A wagon-load of negroes
Riding home
Through the oncoming twilight.

They have worked a long day,
Beginning early,
But nobody feels tired.
This is the gay time!
They are feeling downright larky,
They sing . . . they blag each other . . .
They shout to a small knot of people
Gathered at a crossroads
Who laugh back.
They like it!

The driver whips the horses
And you might think the horses would mind,
But not so!
They feel frisky too,
And take the lashing as a joke.

Down the road they go,
Noisy, clattering along,

Under the big water-oak,
Under the big chinaberry,
By the pear-orchard in bloom.
Each man, back of all the laughter,
Back of all the banter,
Is remembering some woman —
Remembering how saucy and pleasant
Has been the greeting of her
On other nights.
This too is a night,
And a man feels good,
And his arms feel strong and eager.

OLD HOUSES

THREE tumble-down old houses along a street.

A yellow one with a filigree porch
Had a big sign painted along its north wall,
Saying, 'Milinary.'

A white one, once white anyway,
That made you think
Of peaceful evenings —
Rockers on the porch —
Said 'Drugstor'
Over the door.

The third one, whitey-gray,
Had the remains
Of certain past grandeurs.
It might have had a garden once and a fence —
There might have been an arbor . . .
This was the town's 'Garage.'

I forget the name of the place.
The train stopped there some time.

It may sound pitiful and dreary,
But some way it was not.
It was just cozy and comfortable.
And the old coveys had a bench
Outside the garage door.
There they sat, four of them, and joked,
And watched a man paste up a sign:
'J. C. O'Brien's Georgia Minstrells
Will exhibit
April 20.'

GULF BLUE

I THOUGHT the Gulf would be pure blue,
But it's pure thick ocher instead,
A pale heavy slow ocher;
And the wavelets' tops
A kind of starchy white.
New Orleans — Pass Christian — Gulf Port —
I always had in mind,
When I thought of the Gulf,
Great clouds of yellow butterflies,
And a low white sky,
And then the blue!
That was because of a book by Hearn,
Who left a good human love affair at New Orleans
All of a loose end,
To take up with an affair out in Japan.
Nobody knows the bottom of anything . . .
Affairs of one's own are the most unfathomable . . .
I wonder if the Gulf is sometimes blue,
The blue I had in mind?

THE WAGON ROAD WINDS THROUGH A POOL

The water laps and ripples
Under the old barbed-wire fence.
Between the posts
Big lily-pads lie out,
Green flecks upon the white and ruffled
Mirror of the misty sky.

Beauty will have its way —
Listless, unprofitable.
There is, for instance, the lovely water-hyacinth,
And then
There is the hideously beautiful yellow fungus
That grows all down
An old forgotten well.

MALADY

So many pond-lilies
Blossoming in the ditch beside the railroad,
And flags in blossom too,
All alone out there.

All manner of loveliness flaunts itself
Regardless of our appreciation.
It makes one think a little — uneasily . . .
That we are only
A sort of break-out — an irritation, a disturb-
ance,
Not to be taken seriously —
Of the skin.

Those pond-lilies out there, haphazard,
And the flags —
They shall inherit!

V

SHADOWS ON THE SHOJI

HILLSIDE HOUSES

Outlines of roof on roof
Inset and interwoven;
And where this old gray house begins
That old one ends.
All honeycombed together,
Stone steps and bits of wall
And bamboo-laced partitions —
A garden here and there wedged in.
Sometimes a figure, secret, gray and wary —
A face seen for a moment —
Dark slanting almond eyes ——

Roof mounts gray and black against roof,
Gray, gray and black,
And all are black against the gray, cold sky.

TOKYO CHANGES

Above the wide dry moat of stone-blocked walls
Black-patterned in the angles,
The old houses jostle and nudge each other
Under their low black spirit-fending roofs.
The times are changing.
Two tramcars pass
With a sound of bells,
And cries,
And little whistles.

THE PALACE OF THE MIKADO

GRAY guarded gateways,
Walls of gray,
Gray stone,
Black iron —
The Imperial Palace
In the lacquered twilight.

THE BAMBOO BRIDGE

WATER,
Blue water,
Rippling running water,
Lines and circles of splashing shining water
Running over rocks and little stones,
Under the bamboo bridge.

Dusty tired feet,
Trotting, trotting, trotting.
Hundreds of coolies pulling little rickshas
Through the town,
Out through the country lanes,
Over the bamboo bridge
To the Silver Temple.

KYOTO BROOK

WHAT is under the white clear water?
Nine lengths of gay-toned cotton
Anchored and streaming over the stones
In the early morning sun.

Ruffling, rippling,
Tugging at their anchors,
Blossoms and butterflies and fish!

All zig-zagging
In the quick white water,
Flashing and twisting and rioting.

Long wet banners!
Nine cottons in the sunlight!
Gay prints streaming down the brook!

GEISHA STREET

I

Heavy clouds of silence hang in the street
Stirred by slight sounds from within the houses —
Little sounds of unrest,
And the notes of a flute,
Taken up to be played for an instant,
Then hushed
For the more perfect savor of the night.

A ricksha stands tilted forward on its narrow shafts,
And in the shadow of a doorway stands a boy —
Shadow against shadow —
Peering out into the mysterious darkness of the street.

Blotted pools of light pierce through the house walls.
A cat creeps out — and vanishes —
A painted phantom of black upon the pavement.
The line of roofs against the sky is uneven and surprising,

The row of houses is checkered in gold and gray —
An intricate guarded security of dim gold and
gray.
Seasoned bamboo,
And little paintless lattices,
Gold of the pools of light through oiled parti-
tions,
Gold of the globes of light through the thick
darkness —
Through the soft, gray-warm, enchanting dark-
ness of the street.

II

A tiny thread of music trickles down the night.
Some sensitive instrument touched by an ivory
plectrum in long delicate fingers —
An amorous breath wandering down the reedy
throat of some black polished flute.

The smooth daring curve of an elongated oval
face
Thrust forward for a long moment
Dark eyes in a white-gold skin —
And a naked penetrating look.

The muffled slide of a softly closing panel.

COREAN GARDEN

The pale pink plum-flower
With the heart of blood
Sprays its delicate warm beauty
Through the cool twilight.

In thin relief
Against the gray distant hill,
The plum-flower draws its dreaming fingers;
And the soft touch of the wind
Cascades its frail bright wine
Upon the sand.

A pool of plum-flower petals
Has been swept under the orchid-colored azalea.

KAMAKURA

The glory of Kamakura was the glory of sorrow
and the baptism of blood.
The beauty of Kamakura is the beauty of quiet
things,
And the peace of the heart is in the eyes of the
gray-green figure.
The wind blows down from the still snow-fields
of Fuji San,
And the old vermilion shrine is buried among the
cryptomerias.

WINTER TWILIGHT

A LITTLE street pitched sharply up against the
sky,
Hard, cold and gray, and flickering with move-
ment;
With running figures, nervous, zig-zag;
With round shrill globes of yellow light
Slapping and biting into the background;
Little serious compact squads of soldiers
Marching quick-step, flat, hard and decorative.—
New young soldiers marching, feeling, knowing
The new, hard, young ideals of the East.

SILVER AND CHARCOAL

Tramways — whistles — cries —
Crowds hurrying —
Flashes of silver and black —
White and silver —
Silver!

Tokyo streets at twilight.

Silver and charcoal —
Figures moving, hurrying —
Sharp shocks of gray-black through the atmosphere.

Men and women painting themselves in swift strokes
Upon the clear shifting fluid of the twilight.

NIGHT

THE shutters are closed.
All the delicate partitions of paper, bamboo and
twisted cord
Are drawn and latched.
The streets have become darkness
Pierced and knotted together
By round deep saffron globes of light.

FIRES AT NIGHT

The trees are stunted and miserable.
The trees are tired old people,
Wizened and bent;
The old trees murmur a little
In the spring wind.
Why do they build fires of fagots
In the lane, each night?
If the darkness were not so glittered
By these yellow flames,
We might forget for an instant
The cruel loveliness of that young mimosa tree
Shaking her golden blossoms.

THE LAKE

The shallow water in the little lake,
Beaten and struck at by innumerable oars,
Utters its shattered concept of the sky;
And under the wide slim trestles of the bridge
Strange star-shapes
Flash and dance.

Upon the curtains of the little boats
Shadows outline themselves
In a slow fantastic pattern —
Voluptuous embroideries,
Over the faint delicacy of the lantern's light,
Upon the blue gauze of darkness.

THE CRYPTOMERIA

The dark and tortured beauty of the cryptomeria leans out
Into the spotted beauty of the night.
The cryptomeria bends over the half-moon curve of the hills.
Long blue-black fingers stretch themselves pointwise
And lie dark-starred against the sky.
Lunar moths, like pale macabre water-lilies,
Float upon the air,
And the strange harmonic ecstasies of night
Move and wind.

JAPANESE PRINTS

FIVE LADIES TAKING TEA

Five sumptuous weary beauties —
Five languorously reclining ladies
In rainbow garments.

In lines
Above their heads
Horizontal drifts of smoke
From tiny pipes
Hang in watery planes —
Films of transparent silver,
Shifting,
Merging.

Like bats asleep,
Sucked to the under-surface of the gray,
Five monstrous coal-black coifs.

LADIES OF UTAMARO

Shadow upon gold!
Delicately immaterial,
More ætherized
Than the living form of love.

More delicately immaterial,
Even more ætherized, are the living forms
Of these love-worn ladies,
Than are their shadows upon the gilded screens.

KOTO MUSIC

The lady in the peach-colored robe
And the saffron obi
Is playing a scarlet koto.

On her fingers
Fine recurved ivory plectrums are fastened
With leather thongs.
Slowly she plucks a disturbing tune —
Staccato, strange —
From the heavy strings.

Ivory pins are thrust through her shining hair,
And silver ornaments shaped like the prows of
ships;
Also a comb,
And a flower-like twist of peach-pink silk,
And a little silken bow
Where the long pins cross
Over her brow.

She bends and sways above her blood-red harp.

The slow twang of the koto music is harsh
And slightly shocking to the senses of the listeners.

Daylight wanes,
And little clouds of smoke float through the room.

THE LOVELY LEGEND OF THE BIWA

The enchanted lute —
The 'Azure Mountain' —
Touched by the ghostly fingers of Tsunemasa,
By the pale transparent hand of the warrior,
Is the shadow of music
So beautiful
That the heart of the listener is broken and healed
In the same moment.
By the sighing breath of the same emotion,
The heart of the passer-by
Is healed and broken.

The sound of the first string
Is the sound of a falling shower —
The delicate sound of little rain.

The sound of the second string
Is wind at night stirring among the pines.

The third string
Is the calling of birds —
The sound of the heart-strings moved by love.

The fourth
Is the Golden Pheasant who gathers her young.

THE CROW AND THE HERON

(*Horuroku*)

Under a faded orange-colored umbrella covered
with snow,
Two figures
Tread the snow-vanished path.
Their feet are guarded from the white snowdrifts
On high black-lacquered getas.
Black silken Crow and snow-white Heron.

Their hands were drawn back into fur-lined
sleeves
Folded from contact.
But contact is in the dark eyes
Snow-narrowed
And almond-slanted.

They move more slowly than the still cold hours.
And step by step

Black silk and white,
In the breath of the winter wind,
Reveal pale salmon-tinted linings.

Onyx and ivory
They move,
Shoulder to shoulder,
Slowly,
Crow and Heron,
Beneath the white weight of the weeping-willow tree,
And the yellow sky.

TWO ANGELS ON A SCREEN AND THE LOWER ANGEL SINGING TO THE HIGHER

'CURLED cloud-waves of cauliflower-white
On the Lake of Heaven,
And we, twin blossoms of the Blue.

'Your upward-pointing form is white and swift
Like a moving stream.
You lift your red lotus-flower high!
You hold it higher than gold about your throat,
And the blue-red tail of your dress
Flies up on the wing of the breeze.
Under the wide tiara of fine gold

Your hair is blue-black.
Under the crown of your hair
Your lips dream thinly up,
While little smiles
Form and pass in your eyes.
'I, beneath you here,
Forever bend
Above the cloud-veiled thought
Of the inconsequent world.
My flowers, cupped in a moist green leaf
And balanced upon my hand,
Are but to be tossed adrift upon the wind.
In my dress, embroidered by the gray-gold
breath
Of the earth,
And this wind-licked scarf
That banners itself, blood-red, shrill streak over
streak
In the cool blue,
My body sinks ever into the slow waters,
Through the æther,
Downwards.'

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